

Stories of Resilience

**Case Studies
Across Cotton Textile Supply Chain**





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Cotton Textile Supply Chain: An Overview

Across the globe, fashions come and go. When it comes to cotton fabrics, the changing market dynamics significantly impact the lives of *all* those involved in the cotton textile supply chain: production, ginning, spinning, weaving, garment making and marketing. Today, India's textile sector comprises four important segments – modern textile mills, independent powerlooms, handlooms and garments. Handlooms have an umbilical linkage with cotton farmers and the rural farm economy.

In India, while some of these links are strong, and cope with market demands; the others are weak, and flounder with disastrous consequences. The need of the hour is a helping hand to the weak links at the opportune moment.

The Indian textiles and clothing industry contributes about 14% to the country's industrial production, 4% to the Gross Domestic Product, and 16.6% to export earnings. It provides

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direct employment to 33.17 million and indirect employment to 54.85 million through allied sectors. The country has a natural competitive advantage in terms of a strong and large multi-fiber base, abundant cheap skilled labour and presence across the entire value chain of the industry – from spinning, weaving and made-ups to manufacturers of garments.

In general, Indian cotton has a good standing across the world. India produced about 3 million bales at the time of Independence. Today, the production has grown 10 times, with the 2006-2007 production figure pegged at 31 million bales.

The world trade in textiles and clothing is projected to grow at 5.5% to reach \$ 1,000 billion by 2020. India has targeted a share of 10% of this, with exports touching a level of \$ 100 billion. Experts say the target is not ambitious, because India has intrinsic strengths in terms of skilled labour, availability of raw materials, diverse design base, and vertically and horizontally integrated textile value chain. According to a study, the Indian textile and apparel industry can achieve a potential size of US\$ 85 billion by 2010, with a domestic market size of US\$ 45 billion and nearly 60 per cent of exports comprising garments.



Although the textile industry is on the ascendant, all of the vital links in the supply chain have not benefited equally. The fruits of growth have not reached those who sweat it out at the grassroots level.

Some 60 million Indians are dependent on cotton cultivation, processing and trade in cotton. They form the basis of the cotton textile supply chain, but most of them suffer in abject poverty due to a combination of factors. The pauperizing factors include a policy environment that favors only large-scale producers, a monopolized textile industry, and an unorganized workforce that is unaware of even basic rights and entitlements.

Fiscal policies related to the textile industry, both at the Central and State levels, have always been tailored to suit medium and larger units. Although such policies have yielded some positive results to some sections of the intended beneficiaries, they have contributed to structural anomalies as well as unhealthy concentration of downstream segments of the industry in the decentralized sector.

Cotton Textile Supply Chain

FARMERS » WEAVERS » GARMENT WORKERS

No wonder, more than 100,000 farmers have committed suicide in the last decade in India, 1,000,000 weavers have lost their means of livelihood and more than 3,000,000 garment workers face precarious living and working conditions in India.

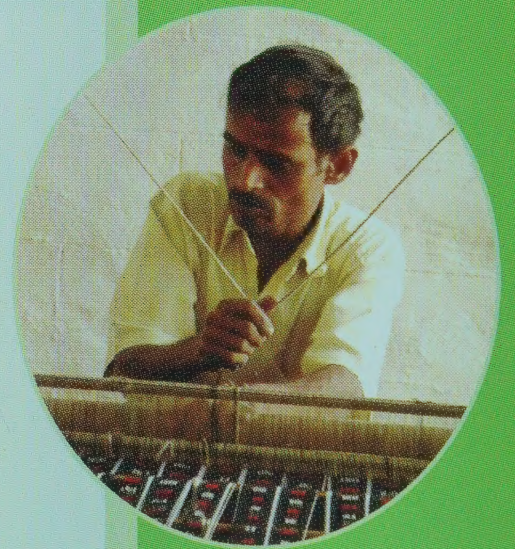


The issues of a typical cotton farmer:

- High Input costs/dependency on external inputs
- Lack of access to capital
- Outsized by scale (technology / markets)
- Ecological degradation and health hazards
- Lack of institutional support system

The issues of a typical weaver:

- State promoted cooperatives largely defunct-marketing crisis
- Dependence on middle men for, markets, design, raw material and money-High indebtedness
- Social welfare schemes don't reach weavers
- Textile policies unsupportive of weaver's reality



The issues of a typical garment worker:

- Lack of fair wages & decent working conditions
- Discouraged to organize
- Poor living conditions
- Absence of agreed labour standards between various players in the supply chain



Cotton farmers in southern Indian state of Andhra Pradesh have had to live with severe drought for many years. In an effort to grow more on poor soil, many have borrowed large sums of money to spend on expensive chemical pesticides and fertilisers. Some have been driven to take their own lives after becoming caught in a desperate spiral of debt.

Handloom weavers face a dismal situation for their livelihood and also struggle financially, mainly because of competition from big weaving companies using large power-looms. The rising cost of yarn and dyes adds to

the problem, jeopardising the weavers' income and quality of life.

And in the factories, where the cotton is made into clothes, people – again, most of them women – work in horrendous conditions. Pay is low, hours are long, and many workers suffer from harassment. There are no support networks, and employees must work without adequate health and safety provisions.

Oxfam GB is working with farmers, weavers and factory workers in the southern states of Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka since 2003, helping them to establish greater livelihood security.



Today there is sunshine in the lives 45,000 people related to cotton farming, 3,000 handloom weavers and 50,000 garment workers living in Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka. The real-life experiences of some of these farmers, weavers and garment workers, faithfully presented in the following pages, are profiles in exemplary courage, perseverance, determination, resourcefulness and leadership.



Stories of Inspiration

Farmers get it right when motivated by fellow farmers. If they see positive results in their or fellow farmers' fields, nothing can stop them from changing their ways. Be it new technology or age-old farming methods, they will adopt it wholeheartedly. All they need is solid proof.





An eye opener

“Previously, I used to cultivate only paddy and vegetables. Now I am cultivating cotton also, thanks to organic farming which has opened my eyes,” exclaims 58-year-old Mudu Tukya, a resident of Kambala Kunta Thanda in Parvathagiri mandal of Warangal district.

Tukya owns 5 acres of land. He has been practicing organic farming for the past seven years. Before Oxfam introduced organic farming, when MARI worked in the mandal on the NPM project, Tukya was the first person to adopt the new system.

Recounting how he overcame the initial barriers, Tukya says: “When MARI people came to our village and asked us to modify farming methods, I did not take them seriously. We had been using pesticides to kill pests and urea as well as nitrogenous compounds to improve soil fertility. There was no reason for effecting any kind of changes. Moreover, dealers and middlemen used to tell us repeatedly that we can improve yield by using pesticides and chemicals.”

Crisis changes men. “After my land lost its fertility and when my field was attacked by pests that could not be tamed, the team (from Oxfam) explained the basics of organic farming. Right in front of



my eyes, the team prepared a mixture of neem seeds powder and extracts of neem leaves. The team collected some of the pests and applied the concoction. To my surprise, the pests died after 10 minutes. Since then, I have stuck to organic farming. I was the first person in the village to take to organic farming,” he recalls with pride.

Tukya was given training. He developed as a model farmer in the village. It was not a smooth ride for him. He recalls: “Some farmers advised me not to fall into MARI’s ‘trap.’ I did have my own doubts then. But, I followed their advice since I happened to see the results at close quarters, I broke ranks with them.”

MARI’s efforts apparently make farmers experts of sorts in due course. Tukya remembers his interaction with a scientist, whom MARI had brought to his field to tackle untamed pests. “He

explained the life history of some pests that destroy crops and detailed how to control them through the organic process. Now I can identify 70 varieties of pests and can describe their life history. This knowledge enables me to destroy them before it is too late.”

Tukya has become an advocate of organic farming in his village. He justifies his new role, saying: “They (farmers who have adopted organic farming) are beginning to see what it does to their yield and how it helps improve overall health. Cases of farmers becoming sick while spraying pesticides in fields have come down.”

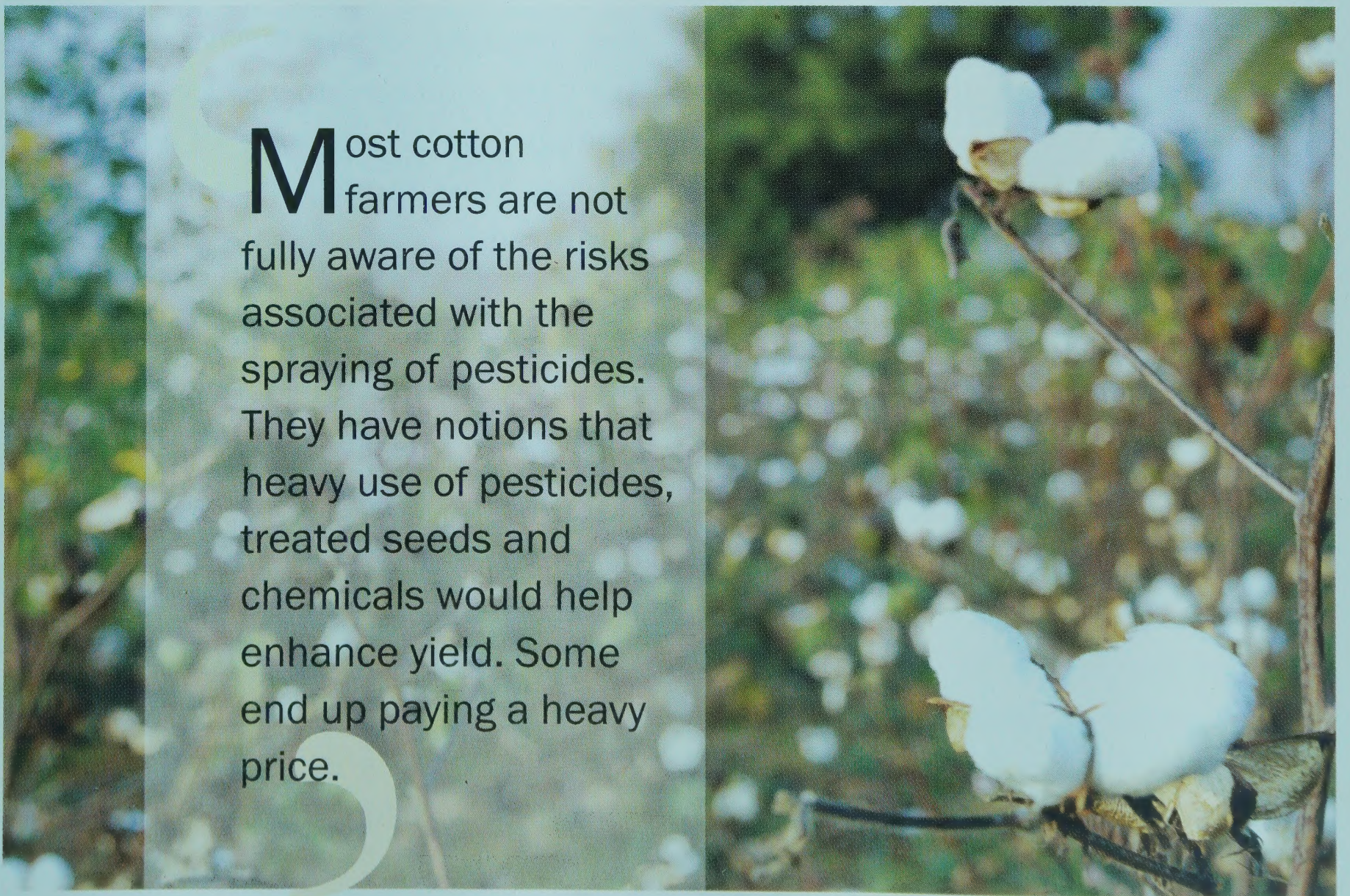
What appeals to the likes of Tukya in Kambala Kunta Thanda is the golden chance to sell their products at a higher price through the right channels in appropriate markets, instead of disposing of the produce at a throwaway price to shady dealers or capricious middlemen.

In the commanding presence of Tukya, the farmers happily chorus: “We are able to sell to millers with the help of the organization. We are getting a fair price for the crop, and, that too, without any deductions like middlemen commissions etc.”



Paying a heavy price

Most cotton farmers are not fully aware of the risks associated with the spraying of pesticides. They have notions that heavy use of pesticides, treated seeds and chemicals would help enhance yield. Some end up paying a heavy price.



Banotu Devali, a 35-year-old woman from the Kambala Kunta Thanda (hamlet) in Narayanapuram village of Parvathagiri mandal in Warangal, now knows how important it is to educate children, instead of having them supplement family income.

Ever since she got married, Devali's life has revolved around her house — looking after children, husband and their livestock.

Devali, vividly describes the circumstances under which her husband lost his power or speech. "We used to rely heavily on pesticides. One day, while spraying pesticides my husband became sick. He lost his voice. We spent Rs.10, 000 on his treatment, but his voice has not improved. He continues to speak in a very barely audible voice."

Devali's family became prosperous after switching to organic farming. "Earlier, we used to depend heavily on chemicals. I remember the times when pests were out of control. Then people told us about organic farming practices



that are being promoted by the Najeewan Mutually Aided Farmers Cooperative Society. "

She joined the Najeewan Mutually Aided Farmers Cooperative Society cooperative in 2004. That was the turning point.

"We became members of the society. We were trained in organic farming, which has brought down cultivation costs. We have managed to reduce our debts though careful planning of household budget. Most importantly, our health has improved."

"Our lives have completely changed. I now mix freely with other members of the society. I have learnt how important it is for children to be educated.



Previously, whenever my children showed disinclination to go to school, I never put my foot down. Now, I insist that they

should go. I don't mind being very firm with – it's after all in their interests."

"In five years' time, I hope we will have a small comfortable house of our own. I want my daughter to study for three more years before she gets married. Just before I joined the society,

I considered marrying her off. Now, I have put her marriage plans on hold.

I hope she gets real good education for a better future. Marriage doesn't guarantee that!"

Today, Devali is an active member of the society's Monitoring Committee, which is busy with plans for its new resource centre. "The resource centre is a project in which we all are involved. It means we now have some place to store our cotton before it is sold in bulk. We

no longer have to sell cotton in small quantities at throwaway prices. We can afford to wait until the crop fetches us fair prices. The society has enlivened our live.



Bypassing the Middleman



Resourceful farmers find ways to bypass middlemen. For most of the farmers, however, the middleman remains messiah in the market, given the lack of supportive institutional mechanisms that provide micro credit, processing & storage facilities, market access etc.

Ragam Satyanarayana, 38, has 6 acres of land on which he cultivates paddy, vegetables, maize and pulses. For reasons beyond his control, he was beholden to the middlemen of Jangoan market. "I used to take loans from them. I had to pay a custom fee to sell my products in the government market. In these circumstances, selling to middlemen appeared reasonable, as we got our money promptly and, in any case, the custom fee would take away the little we would get from the government market."

After CROPS entered the Manikyapuram village two years back, things started improving. Satyanarayana recounts the process: "They gave us training in treating seeds and ploughing land. They taught us how to prepare and apply liquid to control pests, how to make vermi-compost and use it in the fields, and how to destroy pests that get trapped in lures that smell like female worms, and finally how to



effectively store the products. They gave demonstrations right in our fields."

CROPS' personnel guide farmers if they falter in the assimilation of the newly introduced process. The organization also brings scientists to the village whenever there is a requirement to tackle many pests.

Today, Satyanarayana and several other farmers who underwent training are able to handle organic farming on their own. In 2005, they formed the Srishakti

Sandriya Raitula Paraspara Sahayaka Sahakara Utpatti and Marketing Sangam Ltd, with a 12-member board.

The society is run on democratic lines. Explains Satyanarayana: One of the board members is elected president. We have a general secretary and a treasurer. The rest of them are directors. Farmers from three villages are members of the society. Every year 1/3rd of the members retires. New directors are elected in their place. The president, secretary and treasurer have a one-year term. Each director is given training in book keeping, conducting meetings, convincing farmers, and addressing issues concerning farmers. We meet on the 28th of every month to discuss various issues. On the 25th of every month, farmers meet at the village level. I am now the general secretary of the society.”

The society now has 220 members. Both wife and husband count as one member. Every member should pay Rs.500 towards membership. They pay Rs. 10/- towards the application form.

The society is sustained by grants and other forms of support from CROPS. Satyanarayana says: “We are currently having Rs.7, 00,000, which we got as a grant. Farmers get a lot of benefits from the society. The society helps us in purchasing untreated seeds directly from the seeds company. The society gives us

interest-free loans to help us prepare pest control liquid and vermi-compost and towards labour charges, depending on our landholdings. ”

CROPS supports farmers in other ways too. “The society collects cotton from members and also negotiates with millers for direct sale through CROPS. The sale proceeds are deposited in the society’s account. The society pays the farmers after deducting their loans. If a farmer happens to get less money, then only a part of his loan amount is deducted. Due to this, the farmers do not face economic problems. ”

Enhanced market access through the Center for Sustainable Agriculture has emboldened farmers to strengthen the society and look at new ways of helping farmers. “We are planning to increase our membership. We now have Rs. 7 lakhs in the society account. We want to construct an additional storage facility.”





Rebuilding life from a scratch

Many distressed, debt-ridden farmers choose to end lives in several parts of the State. It is a different matter that officials are expected to (or even trained!) to play down the gravity of the situation. With the breadwinner gone, the surviving members of such families will be shattered, both mentally and physically. Giving them machines, appropriate technology, instruction in better farming methods or some such thing at the right time could change their life.

Nakka Pushpa, 35, lost her husband N. Bikshapati, under tragic circumstances 12 years ago when the family was steeped in debts. A resident of Damara village in Atmakur Mandal of Warangal district, Pushpa, has a son, aged 20. Having rebuilt her life with support from Sarvodaya, Pushpa, an illiterate woman, is today a picture of supreme self-confidence. A bitter learning experience and hard-won challenges have brought her to this level.

“When my husband was alive, we took three acres of land on lease. We were



using lots of pesticides, just because other farmers had been using them. My husband told me that he had bought the pesticides with money borrowed from a pesticide distributor in the

market. The distributor loaned the money on condition that the crop should be sold only to him. In addition, he borrowed money from moneylenders towards labour charges and for buying some more urea. That year the yield from our land was not good. We were not able to pay back the debts in full. Next year, in order to continue cultivation, we took more loans from money lenders and middlemen for seeds, pesticides and to pay labour charges. Again the yield was far below our expectations. In two years, our loans, along with interest, totaled Rs 30,000/. The people who gave us loans pressurized my husband for repayment of the money. Every day he used to feel sorry at his declining financial position. One day, he consumed pesticide. We rushed him to a hospital, but it was too late. He had died before we reached the hospital. ”

Bikshapati's suicide left Pushpa distraught. Her son was then just 7 years old. “I was sick. My mother took me and my son to her place. She put my son in school. My mother has three acres of land. From that, she gave me a one-acre plot. I was not in a position to cultivate it for eight years, as it was barren.”

After Oxfam launched its activities in the village, the village head introduced Pushpa to the organization

(Sarvodaya's) leaders. “They asked me if I would be interested in cultivating my land *without* any investment. I jumped at the offer. They explained me the specifics of organic farming. They offered to give me seeds and manure, but urged me to refrain from using pesticides. They asked me to rely on neem seeds powder, which does not cost much. I agreed to their suggestions and started improving my land. I got two tractor loads of sand from a tank. I put that in the fields along with the vermi-compost the organization gave me. With the help of a tractor, I had the land ploughed with the help of two labourers. I had to pay them Rs 100 each, while the charges for the tractor was Rs. 900.”

After Pushpa started taking interest in her once-barren land, all hell broke loose. “All my neighbouring farmers discouraged me, saying my husband died because he cultivated cotton. They taunted me saying even with the use of pesticides our land did not yield good returns and sought to know how I could expect returns by using ‘cow dung and leaves.’ They asserted that pests could *never* be controlled by using extracts of neem leaves. ”

The fellow farmers' outbursts sapped her spirit. Pushpa started having second thoughts. She wondered whether she

was going in the right direction. “I was scared, but I regained my composure and strength thinking that in any case I am not *spending* much. If anything, I am spending only towards labour charges. So be it. If the crop yield is good, it is OK. Otherwise, I will lose labour charges and my efforts at the most. I stuck to organic farming.”

The hand-held support that Pushpa got from Sarvodaya was the turning point in her life. “The organization’s representatives visited me regularly. Their help and my own efforts substantially increased yield from my farm. The best part is that they even purchased the cotton. My son has studied up to Class X. He has been appointed as an internal inspector. He

wants to join the police force and serve society. This has been possible only because support I got ”

Having turned around life from the brink of disaster, Pushpa is now a walking billboard for organic farming. “I am motivating villagers. I refer to my own case while highlighting the benefits of organic farming. They readily believe me. I am satisfied with the process. I no longer have any headache or nausea, which was common when we were using pesticides. I ask them not to buy pesticides and chemicals that harm human beings and decrease soil fertility. They seek my help to make safe and less expensive pest control formula on their own. ”



‘Cast’ to play a larger role

Caste-based hierarchies and schisms in India’s villages play havoc with people’s lives. When communities are knit in innovative ways, say through assets that virtually become common property in village, even single women can lead exemplary lives.



“I still remember the day I got the pulverizer. It was a day that changed my life, as everyone from every caste in the village came to my place. It had never happened before, as nobody cared for me those days. Since we belong to a so-called low caste, I wonder whether people knew we existed, “Elka Samba, a 35-year-old single Dalit (deemed untouchable) woman from Peddapur village, observes, describing the circumstances under which she got an asset as grant from Oxfam and its partner Sarvodaya Youth Organization. Puffed with the new-found pride, she exclaims: “You know, everyone, everyone, ate a meal in my house, even those belonging to the so-called upper castes.”

Married when she was barely 12, she lost her husband, Sadaya, in 1997.

The machine has given a new meaning to her life, which had been bereft of even simple pleasures. “Having this machine has given me recognition in my community. People from our village come to me for having spices or other food ingredients pulverized in my machine. I charge society members one rupee per kg. Others have to pay more. The machine is used primarily for pulverizing neem seeds and turmeric to promote organic farming in the village.”



The society gave her the machine at no extra cost. “I can repay the society over a period of five years. The best part is that I don’t get charged interest,” she reveals with joy.

Life is a lot easier for Elka Samba these days. “I no longer have to do hard physical labour day in and day out. With the machine and my own one-acre piece of land, life has is less demanding on me physically. My future appears very bright. I hope my son will get educated and get a good job,” she says dreamy-eyed.

Elka Samba’s current income from the machine is about Rs 500 per month. “We also get some food from the government. We need to pay Rs 200 to buy other food items and kerosene. I make between Rs 4,000 and Rs 5,000 from my land per year. After paying for my children’s education, I manage to put away some money into our monthly savings account through the society.

“For all this, I am grateful to Oxfam GB and its partner Sarvodaya Youth Organisation,” Elka Samba, with tears of joy and gratitude welling in her eyes.

Samba has two daughters, both married, and a 12-year-old son, who is going to school.

Life was no bed of roses for her when she entered Sadaya’s family soon after marriage. “We did not have any land. We worked on others’ fields for wages. With difficulty we managed to take a small piece of land on lease and started growing cotton. We were using a lot of chemicals to grow the cotton. We lost a lot of money,” Elka Samba says, recounting painful experiences.

The fragile woman survived a major mishap too. “Ten years ago, when I was working on a piece of land where people were digging a bore well, the machine that I was operating fell on me. I was badly injured. Everyone thought that I would die. The ordeal continued for three days. Luckily one of my fellow villagers donated blood and I survived.”

After the accident, the couple bought one acre of land. But, the medical costs related to the accident as well as the amount they owed towards the land they previously leased proved to be a huge burden. They contracted heavy, high-interest debts, resulting in a tragedy. “In 1999, my husband committed suicide due to pressure from creditors. Since then I have tried using my land to grow crop. I also sell vegetables and work as a farmhand to supplement income at times. I am doing all this for my children.”

Following her husband’s death, it was difficult for her to run the family. “I used to borrow money from others even to buy seeds for my crop, from which I got little or no returns. I invested the entire money I earned as a farmhand in improving my land. But I never got any returns. A fellow farmer told me about organic farming. I got to know about the training and the money that was available for inputs. I was encouraged to join the Kakatiya Mutually Aided Farmer’s Cooperative Society,” she says, recalling her studied switch to organic farming.



Building assets with own money

Year after year, 40-year-old Badru of Laxmipuram, Mangal thanda in Nellikuduru mandal of Warangal district, has been selling to pesticide dealers for a pittance all of the paddy, turmeric, groundnuts and vegetables grown on his five acres of land because he had no choice. His wife, Badramma, two sons Mohan (18) and Ramesh (16) as well as his daughter Vennela (12) were the only ones who provided some solace to him whenever he felt dejected in life.

Recounting his hand-to-mouth existence, Badru says: "I used to take my produce to dealers in a market in Mahabubnagar and sell it to them, because they were the only ones who supplied us pesticides and urea bags. They would fix the rates for the products. Other farmers in my village too used to sell their produce to those dealers, as they gave us pesticides on credit and would also buy our products. We often took money from moneylenders to pay for the labourers engaged in our agricultural fields. A substantial portion of the money we got from the dealers had to be paid to the money lenders. At the end of the day, we were left with very little. If the crop fails or is not much in a particular year, then we have had it. Sometimes, things become so miserable that the principal



and interest together balloons into an unimaginable figure. We would know we can never repay such amounts. So, we get pushed to the point of taking the extreme step."

All that is thing of the past in the village. With the intervention of PSS and Oxfam, the lives of these farmers have changed. They no longer use pesticides to control pests. Having been trained in organic farming, they use neem seeds powder and neem leaves extracts to control pests in their fields. They use vermi-compost to develop soil fertility. "The most important change pertains to loans. Those of us who have adopted organic farming formed the Pragathi Sandriya Raitula Paraspara Sahayaka Sahakara Utpatti and Marketing Sangam Ltd. We now get loans from the society. We also get untreated seeds. We get money to pay for labour charges and also material for preparing pest control potion and

vermi-compost. The amount we get as loan from the society is at a nominal rate of interest.”

Farmers supported by the society need not depend on dealers or middlemen to sell their products; and that too, at a throwaway price. “We are selling our products directly to mills with the help of PSS. We collect cotton from all farmers. After it is duly certified that it has been cultivated by organic farming process, the produce is sold to millers. We now make profits that middlemen previously pocketed. I got Rs. 20,000/- for my cotton crop in 2006. It was the first crop after I introduced organic farming.

PSS supplied seeds. We prepared vermi-compost, since we have cattle. All told, we spent not more than Rs 8,000, which we got as loan from the society.

Some of them now have assets and property. Badru says: “I actually began constructing the house in which I am living now with assistance from the government under the INDIRAMMA housing scheme. But, I could complete the house to my satisfaction only because of the profits I made in two years. I don’t think my house would have assumed this shape, had I not adopted organic farming.”





Creating space for oneself

Seven years ago, Bhadramma, 40, was like any docile woman who took in her stride the highhandedness of her husband. She rarely stepped out of Kambala thanda in Parvathagiri mandal of Warangal district. She has two sons. One of them is working, while the other one is studying Engineering (BE) in Hyderabad. The family has three acres of wet land and one acre dry land in Rollakal village.

“I never had the opportunity to go out of our village. I did not go even to Warangal market. With the advent of NPM and organic farming in our village, I managed to turn over a new leaf in life. I used to help my husband in the fields. My husband used to go to the market alone or some others would come and take away the products from the field. Now the situation has changed. My sons ask for accounts. My husband has to come clean now. When they were young, he used to shout at me if I dared to ask him about the money we got for the crop. These days we sell the produce through the organization. We get out money only when we *both* go to the society, as the society is particular that both husband and wife should be active members.”

Bhadramma's husband, Badraiah, was against her active involvement with the meetings held by MARI. She recalls the



initial trying period: “After MARI came to our village, I could not attend their initial meetings. My husband was dead against it. He would scold me even if uttered the word meeting. As the days passed, I steeled myself to go to the venue just for the heck of it. Of course, my husband used to scold me after I returned home.”

Without giving in, Bhadramma continued her visits to the meetings. Her perseverance paid rich dividends. She became the president of the Shanti Mahila Savings Group. “I got used to their meetings and then I started attending MARI's meetings also. Now, I go alone to Warangal. I go to the bank. I go to the markets to get consumer goods. I went on an exposure visit to Medak also.”

Bhadramma is now one of the directors of the Navajeevan Sendriya Raitula Paraspara Sahayaka Sahakara Utpatti and Marketing Sangam Ltd. As one of

its directors, she explains to members of the society the issues that figure at these meetings. She also conducts meetings at the village level and discusses issues concerning farmers. She helps determine who should get loans and how much.

The best part is that there is some kind of transformation in her husband too. "Now my husband co-operates with me. My sons encourage me. Now I have my space, thanks to MARI and OXFAM."



Schooled in the hard knocks of life

For any dainty little girl deeply interested in studies, resisting pressure from family members and relatives to avoid marriage at a tender age calls for courage of the highest order. If such a girl happens to succumb to pressures, it could be for a brief period. She may be down, but not out. The hidden spark in her could ignite a consuming passion anytime, given the right kind of push from people who really care for her.



Uma, 22, belonging to Kundanpalli village in Nellikuduru mandal of Warangal district, married Akantru, her aunt's son, when she was barely 15 and studying in Class IX. She lost her mother when she was young. Recalling the bitter period of her life, she says: "I did not want to marry at that time. I wanted to complete at least Class X, since I was good at studies. But my aunt forced to get married to my cousin."

After marriage, Uma stepped into a joint family. "My parents-in-law, two brothers-in-law, my husband's grand parents as well as the mother and a sister of my mother-in-law stayed with us. The family elders did not allow me to go to school. I never opened my mouth. I bore everything with silence. Even if I needed anything, I refrained from asked them. I accepted whatever came my way, regardless of whether I liked it or not. Nobody really bothered about *my* likes and dislikes."

Uma's mother-in-law used to cook food for the extended family. But, life was not a bed of roses for the little bride. "I would get water, clean vessels, and keep the house spic and span. They never scolded me. I got used to such life. Sometimes I would inform my husband about my likes and dislikes. At times he supported me, but he always obeyed elders in the family."



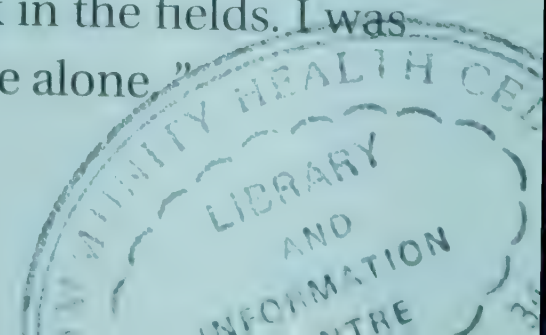
Uma became pregnant for the first time when she was 16. During pregnancy, once when she was fetching water, she slipped and hurt her stomach. "We went to a doctor, but it was of no use. I had to be aborted in the hospital," she recalls.

She became pregnant again and delivered a boy through surgery. Next time, she gave birth to a girl, but the infant died soon after, as it had a hole in the lungs. Though she conceived again, the foetus had to be aborted. Doctors blamed her pregnancy-related problems on the consanguineous marriage, as Uma and her husband are close relatives.

"After that my in-laws treated me well. My health improved, but I was not allowed to go out alone. I could not go anywhere, except to the hospital; and, that too, with my husband, mother-in-law or grand mother in tow. All the others in the family would go out for work in the fields. I was expected to sit at home alone."

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After PSS entered the village, some farmers started debating the pros and cons of organic farming.

“I heard from my family members that PSS is encouraging farmers to adopt organic farming. My husband would discuss the related issues with his brothers and often they would argue whether it would really work. Out of curiosity, I once attended a meeting conducted by PSS. I found it interesting and then I attended three other meetings. PSS officials then became familiar with me. When they came to know that I have studied up to Class IX, they asked me if I would be interested in working for them as an internal inspector. I said I would love to join them as an inspector and, fortunately for me, my husband had no objection to my idea. I went to Warangal for training and took up the job. My lifestyle has changed completely.”

An inspector's job is to visit identified villages and check whether specified fields are following organic process and whether farmers are following on-field procedures properly. I now go alone to various villages for inspecting fields. There is a significant change in me also. I have become very active. I have started participating in all discussions at home. I am totally involved in my job.”

Uma's changed lifestyle continued for 20 days. “My aunt came to our house and berated my mother-in-law, saying there was no need to send me out for work. My mother-in-law then stopped me from going to work. It was back to square one. In fact, the situation worsened, as I would just lie down on the bed, thinking I can do nothing. I became sick in mind and body.”

Sometime later, the supervisor of PSS visited Uma's place. “She wanted to know the reason for my absence. Though I pretended to be ill, she got the wind of the whole thing. She sensed that I was still interested in doing the job. With great difficulty, she convinced my aunt that I would shine if I am allowed to continue in the job. My aunt agreed on condition that I would not have to go out of the village.”

Subsequently, Uma continued to work, but as a village motivator. “Now my job is to motivate farmers in my village to adopt organic farming. I am happy doing my job. My health has improved. Now all my family members co-operate with me. My husband feels happy that I am going to work. I am earning money. These days we buy a lot of things. My husband also asks me to buy things. I like that,” Uma says with an ear-to-ear smile.



Moving past the shadow of husband

Bollempalli Sunitha, 25, was a child when she got married to B. Ravi. This strong-willed woman from Peddapuram village in Atmakur mandal of Warangal, has silently borne the high-handedness of her husband for years.

Due to enhanced awareness of her role in the family and society, Sunitha recently asserted 'enough is enough,' and returned to her mother's place. She now refuses to go back to her husband, as the question at the back of her mind is: "What if he starts beating me again at the drop of a hat?"

Sunitha was 12 and in Class VII when she got married. Going down memory lane, she says: "I was innocent. My husband used to scold me often, but I never talked back. He would beat me for silly reasons so much so that my mother-in-law used to come to my rescue and shout at my husband. Despite all this, I would help my husband in the fields. I was into tailoring as well."

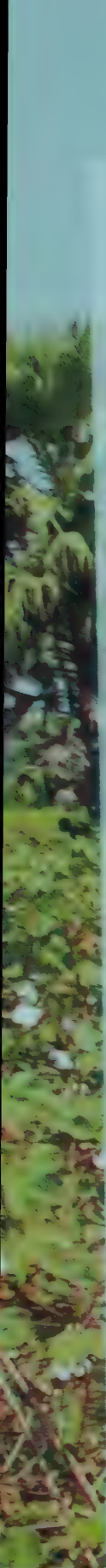
The family has two acres of land. They cultivate cotton (Bt), maize and paddy. Paddy was used largely for domestic consumption. Sunitha has a daughter, who is 9 years old, and a son, aged 7.



After 23, Sunitha could not conceive. "One day when I was helping my husband in spraying pesticides, I collapsed. There were boils in my uterus. The doctors initially tried treating the boils through medicines. Finally, they had to perform hysterectomy. I then learnt tailoring."

On the home front, things became unbearable for Sunitha. "Whenever I tried to know from where he brought money or how much we got from our crops, my husband would rudely say, "It's none of your business. Why do you want to know such things. Your duty is to just work."

Ravi followed other farmers in the village, who spray all kinds of pesticides in the fields. He borrowed money from moneylenders and pesticide dealers. "If he was not in a position to repay the money, he would come home drunk and beat me for no reason," Sunitha recalls with horror.



Sunitha saw a ray of hope when Sarvodaya entered her village. “When I attended one of their meetings for the first time, I was impressed with their case for organic farming. Back home, when I suggested to my husband that we too should take recourse to organic farming, he was furious. He hit me hard and asked me why I attended the meeting in the first place, knowing many men came. My mother-in-law scolded him for his strange behaviour.”

Against Ravi’s wishes, Sunitha continued to attend meetings conducted by Sarvodaya, mainly because of the support she got from her mother-in-law. With great difficulty, Sunitha and her mother-in-law convinced Ravi to adopt organic farming in a portion of their land.

“He did that reluctantly. After a few days, when he noticed positive changes, he himself cultivated the whole land the organic way. We then became members of the society.”

The society now gives them loans for agriculture and provides them untreated seeds.

The home front soon became slightly better for Sunitha, but she had new problems that were created by neighbours. “After I

became a member of the society, I used to go to other villages to attend meetings. My neighbors started attributing motives. They caused me mental agony, saying I was ‘going with men, without doing any work.’ Embarrassed at their loose talk, my husband would scold me, saying I was bringing disrepute to the family.”

It was only after joining the society that Sunitha got to know the details of their debts. She now has an idea about the family’s earnings too. “I know how much amount we get for our crop, since both wife and husband need to be present when they weigh the cotton. The society determines the price for cotton. I also know to whom the cotton is being sold. The society gives the money only if we both go together. We are now cultivating cotton and paddy. We sell a small quantity of paddy.”

As the society’s internal inspector, Sunitha is now earning Rs. 1500/- per month. “When I go to other villages on inspection work, the villagers call me Madam,” Sunitha says gushingly.

Sunitha’s confidence level is very high. “Recently my husband hit me again. I could no longer tolerate his wayward behaviour. Since I know that I can now take care of my children, I have come to my mother’s place.”

Asked whether she has plans to go back, she says with a wink: “He is sending me feelers. I know he wants me to return to his place. I am not sure if he deserves my company. Let me wait and see.”

She is beholden to Sarvodaya for empowering women like her. “All this is because of the strength I got through the society. I am grateful to the society for the constant support they give me.”



From child bride to steely administrator

Marrikukkala Sunitha, a 20-year old girl belonging to Manikyaopuram village of Lingala Ganpuram mandal in Warangal district, is the quintessence of a girl who has triumphed over spirit-sapping personal problems to become a steely administrator, following her appointment as CROPS’ internal inspector.



“I visit the village to monitor the progress in organic farming. I check whether farmers belonging to the Srishakti Sandriya Raitula Paraspara Sahayaka Sahakara Utpatti and Marketing Sangam Ltd. have adopted organic farming. If they have adopted, it’s fine. Otherwise, I insist on that. I educate the ones who commit mistakes in the process,” says Sunitha.

Sunitha has been on board the CROPS’ unit in the village for about six months. The circumstances under which she got the position is fresh in her mind. “As I was interested in attending all the meetings, CROPS appointed me as the internal inspector. They trained me in the basics of organic farming, bookkeeping,

establishing market access, conducting meetings, dealing with various issues and the like. I went to Medak on an exposure visit.”

Life dealt her bitter lessons when she was a child. Her father, Narasaiah, brought home Sunitha’s cousin, Narsihmulu, who had lost his parents. Sunitha has an elder sister, younger sisters and a younger brother. One of her sisters was married when she was studying in Class VII. The next year, the family proposed her marriage with Narsihmulu. This was a shock to Sunitha. She recalls the painful moments: “I used to call him Annayya (brother). I did not agree to the proposal, but elders in the family did not listen. I begged them to at least postpone

my marriage so that I can complete Class X. They did not agree. They performed my marriage with him.”

The only solace Sunitha got was the permission to continue her studies. But, the joy was short-lived. “When I was studying in Class X, my husband left for Hyderabad in search of employment. After a few months, he requested my father to send me along with him. My father agreed and I was sent to Hyderabad. He was nice initially, but then he started drinking liquor. I put my foot down. He used to argue with me. This went on for several months. He then started to harass me physically, saying I had not brought dowry.”

Citing many such incidents of mental and physical torture, Sunitha recalls: “He owed money to several people and they used to shout at him. He stole Rs.20,000 from my sister’s house. My sister did not reveal this to me for about three months. When I came to know about it, I told my sister and father that I do not want to live with him anymore. I went back to our village. I worked as Vidya volunteer for six months. I completed my Intermediate. Now, I am working as an internal inspector in CROPS.”

The Srishakti Sandriya Raitula Paraspara Sahayaka Sahakara Utpatti and Marketing Sangam Ltd. gives loans to members, supplies seeds, and helps them in marketing their products. The society also addresses personal issues.

The society is planning to construct a building, which can store farmers’ produce and serve as a platform for farmers’ meetings and training sessions. “Our officials met the District Collector for establishing the proposed resource center. We met the MDO and the MRO for supply of untreated seeds, establishing link between the market and the building and for obtaining technical inputs. The Jangoan RDO visited our fields in Nelapogula. We requested them to provide vermin-compost plant also. If it is sanctioned, we can supply farmers who are practicing organic farming manure at a reasonable price.

The society currently has 219 members. “Many farmers are interested in practicing organic farming by being a part of the society. They are now *seeing* the benefits,” observes Sunitha.

◀ WEAVERS

The handloom sector provides employment for an estimated 12.5 million people and is the largest rural employment provider next to agriculture. Though it employs a massive number of rural people, the handloom sector is considered a sunset industry. While some of the sector's troubles come from the relentless march of mechanisation, modernisation and sophistication, there's more to the troubled weavers' plight.

It is important to note however that the handloom sector in India operates within a larger textile industry that is quite different from the one within which it operated in the first half of the 20th century. Today powerlooms dominate textile production in India and have encroached upon the handloom sector's traditional market.



Going beyond weft and warp

Even weavers may have it in them to make it big as an entrepreneur. Some of them at least dream big, instead of whining about problems. All they need to prove their mettle is the initial push, right kind of training, and timely support in an environment that is clearly conducive to growth and expansion.



Miryala Bhaskar, a 40-year-old weaver of Siripuram village in Ramannapet mandal of Nalgonda district, fits the bill. He has studied up to Intermediate. He has contributed much to his society, Srilaxmi Cheneta Kutumba Upadi Utpatti Podupu Sangam, which is keen on securing government orders. The weavers of the



society know about the economies of scale and the advantages of having a ready market.

“We invited Mr. Suravam Sudhakar Reddy (lawmaker) to inaugurate the building of our society. We requested him to support the handloom industry by purchasing cloth from us for government servants. It could be for police dress, table cloths/curtains, sofa covers in government offices, hospital clothes, hostel dress, school uniforms or whatever. The process is on.”

Citing orders previously placed for silk saris to be given to airhostesses, Bhaskar comments: “It was a good sign for our business. We hope that we will henceforth get orders for the other items that we have now identified.”

Bhaskar’s confidence levels are very high, because of the efforts of organizations like Chetana. “They explained dyeing yarn with colours and gave us fresh designs to work on. They coached us in life sustainability and gender sensitivity. As for building institutions, they helped us in forming groups, identifying issues, solving them, conducting meetings, book keeping, maintaining accounts etc. After the training, we could establish the Srilaxmi group and a mutually aided cooperative society.”

Bhaskar has three children — one daughter and two sons. His daughter studying B.Com Computer Science, is married. His elder son is a trainee in a path lab, while the younger one is in IX standard.

Bhaskar has been a weaver from childhood. Turning nostalgic, he says: “I used to help my father in weaving. I used to set the base for weaving. My father used to sell saris and *dhotis* at the local fairs. I used to go around other villages, selling cloth. My father used a single colour. I started weaving on my own in 1984.”

In 2006, Chetana did a survey on weavers. It later organized a meeting. “They urged us to form a society and offered to support it. So, with their help, we organized one more society called Srilaxmi Cheneta Kutumba Upadi Utpatti Podupu Sangam in January, 2007.”

Chetana helped the MAC society too. “In Ramannapet mandal, we have six different groups. The members of the six groups established the Raatnam Handlooms Weavers Mutually Aided Cooperative Society Ltd in June 2007. The membership fee is Rs.500. Now, there are 597 members in Raatnam MAC society,” Bhaskar says with pride.

Quality is never the watchword among weavers who are left to their own devices. Working normally in an environment that saps their energy, they hardly have the need or nerve to innovate. A nudge from the right quarters and in the appropriate manner weaves magic in their lives.

Vanam Jyothi, a 26-year-old woman of Vellanki village of Ramannapet mandal in Nalgonda district, is the perfect example of what simple weavers can achieve with sustained focus on the quality of their work.

“After I joined the group, Sanghamitra gave us training in how to dye better and improve weaving methods. We now go by established benchmarks and get better prices. We are also in a position to reach wider markets. We now get almost double the rates, as our work is now marked by very high quality, Jyothi mentions.

Jyoti has two children (aged 9 and 5), who are studying in a private school in Vellanki. “Once we get established, I would like to send them to town for education,” she says, expressing her gratitude to Oxfam GB and Sanghamitra, which have made it possible for her.



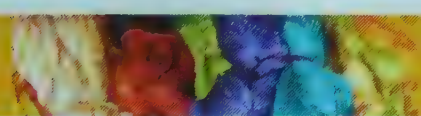
“I am now particular about giving the best quality. We have learnt this important requirement through their interventions. We are also able to save money, a part of which is used by the group to help other members in times of need, be it for school fees, medical bills or some such thing. In 5-10 years, we hope to have regular employment so that we can improve our standard of living,” Jyoti says, touching on her future plans.

She is full of praise for Oxfam GB.” It is working with its partner organization

Sanghamitra to help weavers like us gain better market access. We started working with them in 2003. They helped us with dyeing techniques and design development so that we can produce better quality products. I am a member of the Archana Livelihood Group. These days we get contracts for furnishings from big stores in Hyderabad. We are

one of 125 families who have received this help.”

Jyoti got married at the age of 14. “Before marriage, I learnt the pre-loom process with my family in another village. My parents as well as in-laws are weavers. So at the time of my marriage, I was familiar with this industry.”



Leading the field

“I am one of the leaders of the society (Chitki Handlooms Weavers Mutually Aided Cooperative Society Ltd). As a leader, I talk to people and settle various issues within the group (Mahamayee Cheneta Kutumba Upadi Utpatti Podupu Sangam). The members of the MAC society meet often to discuss problems facing weavers. We make concerted and sincere efforts to find solutions. Now, due to MAC meetings and group meetings, I get to know various problems confronting weavers,” says 22-year-old Machhala Latha, who is eight months pregnant.



My parents work on a powerloom at Jangoan in Warangal district. I have learnt to weave on handlooms since my marriage.”

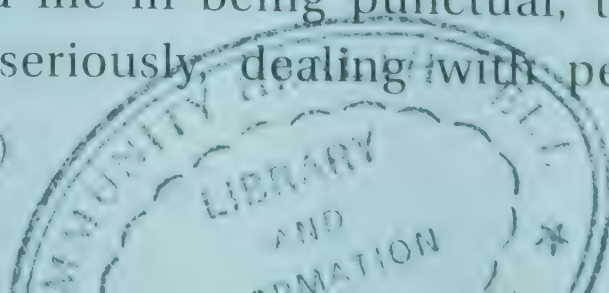
Latha could hone her leadership skills, as she has never missed the meetings conducted by Chetana, which launched its activities in the village in 2006.

Latha has a four-year-old son. Her husband, Machhala Venkatesh, 31, is also a weaver. “My husband has been a weaver since his student days.

“Earlier, I never knew about these things. The training that Chetana gave helped me in being punctual, taking work seriously, dealing with people,

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and assimilating marketing techniques. Now, with the help of the MAC society, we are getting yarn at reasonable prices, while our cloth fetches fair prices.”

Chetana trains various community-based groups in gender sensitivity. “We now know the importance of women and their contribution to the weaving sector,” Latha observes with the panache of a person knowledgeable about what equal opportunity means in any occupation.

Latha continues: “Chetana in fact helped form several community building organizations in the village. We established the Mahamayee Cheneta Kutumba Upadi Utpatti Podupu Sangam in January 2007, starting with

10 members. We have been running the group successfully. We collect every month Rs.50 from each member’s savings. From the pooled amount, we give loans to members who are in need. We give priority to addressing health problems.”

The Chitki Handlooms Weavers Mutually Aided Cooperative Society Ltd was established in June 2007. Each member’s share is Rs.500, aside from a registration fee of Rs. 20.

“Chetana is planning to train us in the right way of dyeing yarn using natural colours. They are in the process of finalizing the dates for the training,” says Latha, eagerly awaiting the training session.



Letting the master go

“My husband works under a master weaver. Recently I joined the Achina Livelihood Group. I have since learnt many skills that will help me in setting up our own business. I really hope I can convince my husband to give up working for the master weaver. I want our hard work to benefit *us*,” says an assertive Vanam Anita.



A 25-year-old woman of Vellanki village in Ramannapet mandal of Nalgonda, Anita has two sons, aged 5 and 6. “When I was a child my family used to work in a powerloom. But, after I got married I had to learn weaving on handloom.

It is not that her husband is against establishing their own firm. Her concern is *when* he would choose to get out of the comfort zone. “Before I joined the group my husband did not have the confidence that we could be on our own one day. This confidence is growing gradually in us now, as we have market access, skills and information. Next year we can start our business on a small scale and then grow it.”

The attitudinal change in her has strong reasons. “Working under a master weaver means that our income will remain very low. That’s one reason my in-laws and my husband have never prospered in life. The group that I joined

has encouraged me to establish our own business. I now have market access. I am sure of getting a better price for our products. I better understand the needs of consumers today. I have been coached in leadership skills. Because of Oxfam, we are now strong personalities in the village with many people looking to us for our newly acquired skills. Oxfam has hired two design consultants who train us and help us get new contacts for widening our network.”

The master weaver kept the margins to himself. “He never gave us any information about the costs and margins. We never understood that he was profiting from huge margins at our cost. Under the master weaver, we get Rs 100 per day. If we do it on our own, we should get at least Rs 150 per day.”

Anita is fully aware of what it means to be independent weavers. “Getting a better income means we will have more

money to buy nutritional food. We need not struggle to pay school fees for our children's education. Right now, we are always behind schedule in making our payments. We want to live with dignity.

We want our children also to become weavers. But, they should be highly skilled independent weavers and must have access to information that helps them grow."

Pushing the horizons

"We went in a procession to our local MLA seeking immediate aid to handloom weavers, considering the number of our fellow weavers who died of hunger," is all 36-year-old Surapalli Mangamma, who has been a weaver since her teens, would say.

One cannot fail to see the glint of the advocacy role into which she has been catapulted in Samsthan Narayanpur village of Samsthan Narayanpur mandal in Nalgonda district. She knows what it means to kick against the pricks. Pressed to reveal the outcome of their meeting with the legislator, she observed: "They said they would discuss it in the assembly and settle the issue. They discussed our issue, but I do not know the result."

That was not all. Mangamma and those of her ilk went further, thanks to the hopes created by the revival of the State legislative council. "We met the MLC and sought his help in ensuring that each weaver gets at least Rs. 1, 00,000 as loan at a nominal rate of interest."



Mangamma's husband, S. Shekar, 47, is also a weaver. The couple have a daughter, Shalini, aged 18 years, who is in BSW second year and a son, Madhur, aged 15 years, who is in Class X.

Weavers for the past 25 years, the couple produce silk and cotton saris, among other products. Until 2005, the likes of Mangamma were heavily dependant on the official Samsthan Narayanpur Cheneta Sahakara Sangam Cooperative Society. "We used to get orders only from this society. The society gets orders from APCO."

"Following the entry of CHIP in 2005 and of Chetana in 2006, things

started falling in place in Samsthan Naraynpur with regard to gender sensitivity, improved production methods, and assertion of basic rights and entitlements. They organized self-help groups,” says Mangamma, who belongs to a group encouraged to weave silk saris.

“They strengthened our institutions and helped us properly dye the cloth. On their advice, we formed the Om Mahila Cheneta Kutumba Upadi Utpatti Podupu Sangam, starting with 10 members. We save Rs 60 every month. We give loans to members at a nominal rate of interest. Although two of our members have migrated elsewhere, we are continuing the group’s activities without any let-up. We have two groups in our village, two in Pochampally mandal and another group in Choutuppal.

With encouragement and support from Oxfam and Chetana, the members of the five groups from Narayanpur and Pochampally mandals formed the Chitki Handlooms Weavers Mutually Aided Cooperative Society Ltd in June 2007. Each member contributed Rs.500, apart from Rs 20 as registration fee.

The members of Chitiki society joined hands with the Chetana Colour Weavers (CCW), an organization supported by Oxfam. Chitki society members are also members of the CCW. Their focus is now on tapping external markets. “This organization is trying to secure orders for us from markets in Bangalore. Oxfam has supported our society by funding us to the tune of Rs 60,000,” notes Mangamma.



Leading by example

Hema Sunder Rao at 55 years of age is a vocal advocate for his community. As a young adult he along with the fibres he made pen his tools to express himself, a habit he still continues. Starting his day at 4am, he weaves till 9 and from 9-5 he is a reporter writing articles and compiling information about his people and their lives.

Actively participating in the 'Chudeswari Sameraalu' (an weavers festival held once in 13 years), his pride and sense of belonging comes to fore as took part in the festivities.

"For us who bring pattern a design to coloured thread and give it a new form, this festival is a true celebration of our community. Its the time to forget the rhythm of our looms and experience the rhythm of life". He says joyfully as he joins hundred others who have gathered in Pedana in Krishna District.

Acknowledging the catalytic role played by CHIP, he narrates proudly how they are able to understand the schemes and various measures taken by the government now. He narrated how due to CHIP's during the November 2006 floods, weavers vulnerability to disaster was recognized by the state government and along with farmers, weavers were also compensated for the first time in history of the state.



He ruefully acknowledges that earlier also they toiled hard but never kept the market in mind, but today we have become smarter." We keep the market in mind when we weave designs and it has helped get a better price".

"Earlier we got up and weaved and weaved till our backs ached. Today we do the same but there is a new found confidence as we understand our situation better and with help of CHIP have gained more exposure to this sectors 'looming' problems. Today I discuss with my fellow weavers on how we can avail the facilities and fight for our rights"

Adding further, he applauds the role played by CHIP in bringing together government, weavers and other agency to a platform to discuss issues of the weavers. 'This has not been easy but the role played by CHIP is commendable'. They never gave up and that has inspired us to come together and be more vocal about our demands".

An undying spirit

Emerging from his loom-pit in the twilight, the frail structure of Suraiah defies the undying spirit of man who has woven so many colours that the dusk pales in front of his weak eyes.

At 65, when most people retire, he is at the pedal at break of dawn. The rhythm of his looms keeps him going everyday and night weaving a tapestry that makes him and his master proud. Yet within the colours around, his own life is stark in contrast to the colourful fabric he weaves.

Recounting how they fought for patta rights, his eyes shine with pride as he shows his worldly property a two room house barely lit with a bulb. "This did not come on a platter, Government allotted 300 houses in this part of town (eventually it came to be known as 300 colony). As per the norm it was a 1 room structure but how can a weaver work if there is only 1 room. Collectively we fought and after 2 years we got permission to extend the space and we added one more room".

Suraiah adds "Earlier weavers were a respected community, we could



afford a better life. Wages were also better. These days wage is low and expenses are high. And here is where organization like CHIP come and help us understand that we have to fight and not give up. Due to their effort the age of weavers for availing the old age pension scheme was brought down from 55 years to 50 years. This has been a big help to us as our productivity decreases after 50 years due to the nature of our work. It's their untiring support that has again given us the confidence. Without CHIP I would not have known what the government budget for weavers was, In fact this year I was eagerly awaiting for the budget and meet CHIP representative to learn if atleast now we counted for the Government" he says signing off.

The textile value chain extends from raw material (fibers) to finished products (clothing and made-ups), with spinning, weaving, knitting and processing as intermediate processes. In India, there is a preponderance of small-scale spinning, weaving, finishing and apparel-making enterprises.

India's garment-making sector employs about 4 million people, mostly women. More than 1,500,000 garment workers engaged in readymade garments exports industry in various parts of Andhra Pradesh and

Karnataka are living under precarious conditions. Gender issues dog farmers, weavers and garment workers.



Half-hearted efforts made by government agencies and weak NGOs to secure their rights have not yielded the desired results. Let alone forming strong unions, most of these workers are not in a position to avail of gratuity, provident fund, maternity benefits, health insurance and the like. The activities of Oxfam and its partner organizations have started making a difference in their lives.

We have to be the change we want

It is not easy for a young woman who slogs in a garment factory under an exploitative manager to also tackle a husband who cheats on her and loves tormenting her. Groups that work for gender equity in a focused manner and build community-based organizations with clear agendas can make a difference in such cases.



“My husband was not supportive right from the beginning. A few months after our marriage, I realised that he had been going to other women. I was then too young and vulnerable, but hoped things would change. I learnt to grin and bear it. I bore him three children in six years. Constant harassment continued on the home front. On top of that, I was working in a factory where the Production Manager treated employees like animals. All this proved to be too much,” says 28-year-old Yamuna, recounting the trigger for her becoming a champion of employee rights.



“Nothing but ‘target’ drives these managements. We appreciate targets, but that doesn’t mean workers should be treated shabbily. If we are absent for even one day, they ask us not to come for

a week and thus deprive us of our wages. It's not easy to constantly bear abuses at factory," Yamuna points out, as part of her litany of charges against unscrupulous managements of garment factories.

That's when they got support from the Munnade, which was formed as a support group. "Sharing workplace issues as well as problems at home helped us in bonding for mending matters. We started dealing with issues related to provident fund, bonus, termination etc. Alongside, we started handling domestic violence," Yamuna states, while outlining the role of the

self-help group formed by them. "The SHG helps us in having immediate access to credit and brings many women together. In fact, women came together and contributed Rs. 15, 000 to help an orphaned child."

Munnade is also extending legal support and counselling services to members.

"I suffered a lot in life. My struggle has made me realize that one has to fight for one's rights. I want to help others like me in their fight. Women should not suffer. Munnade has showed me the path to lead others."

When women come together, nothing can stop us

"We want a *sangathan* (registered union) to fight for our rights. As I fought for garment workers' rights in the factory where I worked, the management terminated my services and instituted an inquiry. The management subsequently withheld the case against, but is not allowing me to enter the factory. I am paid 75% of my salary. Why should they be so scared of an ordinary worker," asks fiery Rukmini, 34-year-old garment worker, who married at 16 and remained at home for three years before starting to supplement family income in Karnataka's Mandya district.

Articulate and blunt, her refrain is: "There should be dignity of labour.



We work so we demand respect and security."

Born in a family of four (two brothers and one sister), Rukmini initially worked as an apprentice with a tailor. It was during her stint as a garment worker in a factory that she honed her innate



leadership skills. In that factory, women workers faced constant harassment from the Production Manager.

Rukmini chose to take on the management. Although she approached the Labour Commission through a front called Munnade, things did not work out as they offered to deal only with a registered body. “In our struggle, Cividep helped us in a big way. It provided the support we needed and helped us fight injustice.”



On the home front too, she has drawn clear boundaries. “My husband (who sells coconut) normally supports me. At times, when we have arguments, I tell him, ‘I can leave you, but not my organisation, which has given my life a meaning.’ That puts him in his place,” she says with a mischievous smile.

Rukmini is a strong advocate of organizations like Munnade, which she says needs support from other sectors too. “It will need support until it can stand on its own. New leaders need to emerge to take the struggle forward. Till then, my job is not done.”

Rukmini attended the Workers’ Olympics held in Bangkok in 2004. In her words I was very excited to travel by plane and was wondering what it would like to meet other workers. When I met others there I realised that the problems of workers are the same all over the world.”



Partners in Positive Action

Oxfam GB, a member of **Oxfam International** registered in United Kingdom, is today a vibrant worldwide movement of people fighting poverty as one. While harnessing people power with laser-like focus, Oxfam has a button on everything that impacts human lives. Its resources are liberally used to save lives, develop pro-poor projects, and transform communities and institutions with far-reaching impact.

Central to all its activities is the conviction that poverty is much more than lack of resources. Active in over 100 countries, Oxfam drives home the incontestable fact that in a wealthy world, poverty is simply the outcome of *bad* decisions made by *powerful* people. Its campaigns target leaders who can (and often *do*) introduce positive changes. Its methods ensure that poor people take control of their lives and solve their problems with exemplary self-reliance and the right kind of support.

Across the world, Oxfam GB works with many partners at the local levels.

The Partners

The **Centre for Rural Operation Programmes Society (CROPS)**, a registered grassroots development organization, was established on November 15, 1991. Based in Warangal district of the Indian State of Andhra Pradesh, CROPS has more than 10 years' experience in promoting organic crop production systems, non-chemical approaches to pest management, seed production, organic & integrated pest management, community institutional building and micro credit.

The **Modern Architects for Rural India (MARI)**, established as a society on January 21, 1988, is based in Warangal district of Andhra Pradesh. It has over 10 years' experience in promoting organic crop production systems, non-chemical approaches to pest management, seed production, organic and integrated pest management of chillies crop, comprehensive land development, and building of community institutions and post-harvest value addition enterprises run by women.

The **Pragathi Seva Samithi**, established on May 8, 1991, is a registered body based in Warangal, Andhra Pradesh. It has more than 10 years' experience in promotion of sustainable agriculture, tank management, capacity building, institutional building, organic agriculture, micro credit and livelihood promotion.

The **Sarvodaya Youth Organization (SYO)**, established in December 1993 and based in Warangal district of Andhra Pradesh, is focused on promotion of organic cotton and non-pesticidal management programme; community development; programs related to health services in tribal area, integrated nutrition and health, HIV/AIDS; rehabilitation of child labour, campaign against GM crops and microfinance.

The **Centre for Handloom Information and Policy Advocacy (CHIP)**, based in Chirala, was established on July 28, 2000 as a grassroots development organization. It is involved primarily in fostering development of poor & marginalized handloom weavers, enabling development of handloom sector through policy advocacy, , contributing to public policy debate on textile competition, establishing market linkages, improving weavers' living and working conditions, and organizing weavers-oriented seminars and workshops.

The **Chetana Society** is a grassroots development organization that was established on January 12, 1996. Based in Hyderabad, Chetana Society is involved in raising awareness on environmental conservation and sustainable development, development of handloom sector, promotion of organic farming practices among small and marginal farmers as well as building awareness on economic governance issues, WTO and trade aspects.

The **Civil Initiatives for Development and Peace–India** (Cividep), a labour support organization established in January 2000 has nearly five years' experience in mobilizing women workers in the readymade garments sector. Cividep has participated in major campaigns aimed at ameliorating the living and working conditions of garment workers. It also helps build sustainable community organizations that work for pro-poor policy changes and gender equality.

